



Testimony of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Connecticut

By Thomas Burr

Education Committee

March 1, 2023

Dear Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, and members of the Education Committee; my name is Thomas Burr, and I am the Public Policy and Affiliates Relations Manager of the Connecticut Chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI Connecticut). I am submitting testimony today in regards to **S.B. No. 1095 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS.**

NAMI is dedicated to building better lives for those with lived experience with mental health conditions, and their families. NAMI Connecticut and its nine local affiliates provide support groups and educational programs for people with mental health conditions and their loved ones and advocates for policies to improve the lives of people affected by mental health conditions.

NAMI's national public policy is focused in 3 main areas, one of which is to improve care. As a national organization, NAMI fights for policies to ensure people get the best possible care. This includes expanding access to health insurance, requiring parity coverage of mental health care, and ensuring that the right services are available at the right time.

Another focus of NAMI's public policy advocacy is to intervene early, where we fight for policies to ensure people get help early. This includes better research to detect and identify mental illness, integration of mental health care into primary care settings, and access to mental health in schools.

The 3rd focus is to divert people involvement in the criminal justice system. NAMI fights for policies to get people help, not handcuffs. This includes expanding access to crisis services, promoting best practices in de-escalation, and diversion of people experiencing psychiatric crises to treatment.

As the country's largest grassroots mental health organization, we know that diverting people from involvement in the criminal justice system can be life changing, and that it should never be a crime to be sick. We also know that the current criminal justice system in Connecticut exacerbates mental health conditions, and is not a place where anyone with an underlying mental health condition should be sent for treatment. Especially children!

We have heard recent statistics that indicate large numbers of children are being arrested in certain schools here in Connecticut. This is clearly a red flag that required, positive interventions by trained social workers, school psychologists, and therapists are NOT being provided.

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Again, children who are exhibiting behavioral issues are typically, in most cases, dealing with an inadequately treated underlying mental health condition, unresolved trauma, unresolved issues, poverty, or some combination of all of the above. Arresting these children simply adds fuel to the fire and does not resolve the underlying causes of the behavioral issue(s). And though it is beyond the scope of this bill, we hope that members of this Committee support investments in local school systems, so they shall hire a meaningful and adequate staff of social workers, school psychologists, and therapists.

We therefore echo the main points that you will hear from the folks at the Special Education Equity for Kids of Connecticut (SEEK) organization:

- School Resource Officers (SRO) that are well trained are welcomed and valued members of their school communities;
- Whenever an SRO becomes involved, a school-based mental health professional also needs to be present;
- A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the school superintendent and the local police department should be a public-accessible document that spells out that the specific role of the SRO;
- All SROs need to be trained initially and repeatedly in disabilities, the manifestation of those disabilities, restorative practices, de-escalation, and the requirements of the IDEA and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act;
- SROs should also be trained in developing supportive relationships with students and understand the relationship between behavior and disability;
- SROs should be selected, based on psychological screening, to be accessible, nurturing, and non-reactive; and
- The choice of individuals to fill this role should be made in collaboration between the Police and school administrations.

Therefore, in summary, we support S.B 1095, with the inclusion of the items mentioned above.

And as a related note, we also support HB 6758, AN ACT CONCERNING STAFFING FOR CERTAIN ROLES AT THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION. and encourage the Committee to take seriously the testimony provide by the good folks from the Special Education Equity for Kids of Connecticut (SEEK) organization.



Thank you for your time and attention.

Respectfully,

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